

Bill McKibben, 2010, *Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet*

Reviewed by THOMAS C. YOUNG

Bill McKibben's Eaarth: Making a life on a tough new planet was first published in 2010 (Hold, Henry & Co. USA; Knopf Canada, CDN) and again in 2011 (St. Martin's Press) with a new Afterword by Bill McKibben. McKibben's Eaarth explores the present-day reality of global climate change and the choices we face on the uncertain path ahead.

Bill McKibben has earned worldwide renown as a journalist, author, and distinguished scholar for his strong and convincing message on the causes and effects of climate change in the contemporary world. McKibben has written prolifically on the topic, and in *Eaarth*, one of his more recent volumes, he has created a moving yet highly informative argument that begins with (for many readers) a jolting assessment of current conditions on planet Earth—not just where we are headed with climate change but where we are now. He proceeds, in the end, to more gentle recommendations on the existence and accessibility of a range of useful steps that would help ensure a livable future, but these steps require action in the present, not in some unbounded future time.

Several pithy, well-written reviews of *Eaarth* have appeared elsewhere and are readily accessible both online and in print (e.g., *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/books/review/Greenberg-t.html?_r=0/, *The Ecologist* http://www.theecologist.org/reviews/books/457395/eaarth_by_bill_mckibben.html, *ThinkProgress* <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2010/05/22/206055/review-bill-mckibben-book-eaarth/>) and of

course, there is an abundance of reviews by major booksellers and their customers, offering a highly dimensioned wealth of reflection on McKibben's *Eaarth*. Accordingly, rather than recast views and information from existing substantive reviews, I have attempted to provide an update to the circumstantial context for the book and a few personal reflections on the content of *Eaarth*.

McKibben provides his views over the course of four chapters, each of which he has documented extensively with nearly 500 reference citations. As noted, McKibben begins *Eaarth* with a shock—he introduces the reader to the concept that Earth, as we have known it, simply no longer exists. Rather, we live on a new and different planet—a tough, new place to live that he calls “Eaarth.” Through example after example, McKibben takes great care to ensure the reader understands that climate change has created a new world that we live in *now*; that climate change effects are not phenomena that future generations will be the first to experience and manage. On the contrary, McKibben's words in *Eaarth* make it very clear that we are the ones who must find the solutions to manage the heretofore inexorable warming of our new world, the planet formerly known as Earth.

Although McKibben's thesis clearly states that we live in the midst, rather than on the verge, of a changing climate, I find it easy to believe that McKibben actually welcomed the words of President Barak H. Obama in his Second Inaugural Address:

We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations. Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms.

—President Barack H. Obama, Second Inaugural Address, 21 January 2013

And I am certain McKibben was heartened by the words of the President in his 2013 State of the Union Address:

Now—now, it's true that no single event makes a trend. But the fact is the 12 hottest years on record have all come in the last 15. Heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods—all are now more frequent and more intense. We can choose to believe that Superstorm Sandy and the most severe drought in decades and the worst wildfires some states have ever seen were all just a freak coincidence, or we can choose to believe in the overwhelming judgment of science and act before it's too late . . . if Congress won't act soon to protect future generations, I will. I will direct . . . my Cabinet to come up with executive actions we can take now and in the future to reduce pollution, prepare our communities for the consequences of climate change, and speed the transition to more sustainable sources of energy.

—President Barack H. Obama, State of the Union Address, 12 February 2013

Nevertheless, I hear much more resonance between McKibben's message in *Eaarth* and the words written nearly two years earlier by former Vice President Al Gore:

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... we are now routinely making really bad decisions that completely ignore the best available evidence of what is true and what is false. ... That is exactly what is happening with U.S. decisions regarding the climate crisis. The best available evidence demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that the reckless spewing of global-warming pollution in obscene quantities into the atmospheric commons is having exactly the consequences long predicted by scientists who have analyzed the known facts according to the laws of physics. ... The scientific consensus is far stronger today than at any time in the past. Here is the truth: The Earth is round; Saddam Hussein did not attack us on 9/11; Elvis is dead; Obama was born in the United States; and the climate crisis is real. It is time to act.

—Vice President Al Gore,
Rolling Stone Magazine
(Issue 1134/1135, 24 June 2011)

The multifaceted tone of the words used by Vice President Gore in his above statement combines factual information with a bit of hyperbole for emphasis, considerable irony, and a measure of humor. Gore's tone, for me at least, is quite reminiscent of the tone used by McKibben throughout much of *Eaarth*. And I think that is fine, even necessary, in fact. I say necessary because by its dimensionality, the scope of climate change greatly exceeds its merely global geographic extent; it is pervasive and truly fearsome to contemplate. Yet, the day-to-day effect most of us perceive in our private lives is not of that much consequence, generally speaking, though the residents in the New York and New Jersey areas brutalized by Hurricane Sandy would justifiably challenge that view. Consequently, the course of action and thought for many, and maybe most of us, as we busily engage in living, may include a cursory acknowledgement of the issue, but for the most part, our responses will be to ignore the matter of a changing climate or what we can do

about it for the present moment, perhaps with a promise to give it more consideration in a later, less busy time.

But Vice President Al Gore gets it. He has been a vocal and exceptionally high-profile advocate for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and taking other steps to combat climate change over the past several years. And President Barack Obama

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gets it as demonstrated by his cataloging of recent (and once considered rare) natural disasters and his willingness to vow action if Congress fails to act. And with Bill McKibben's help through my reading of *Eaarth*, I now get it, having been transformed, not from a climate change skeptic (for I understood the science in a broad sense) but from one of the many who had failed to grasp the temporal proximity of the reality of climate change. But I get it now—we are living in its midst and now is the time, indeed, to act.

In *Eaarth*, McKibben shows a true gift for keeping the reader engaged in learning about climate change, including the big picture and the small one, the causal dynamics behind change, and the diverse and pervasive effects of that change on the Earth we used to live on. It could be a dry topic, but McKibben makes it otherwise. He does so by presenting a wealth of factual information, analyses developed by himself and others, some hyperbole, frequent irony, a sense of weightiness and sincerity, and when the time is right, a touch of humor. I have picked out a passage from *Eaarth* that I believe is representative of McKibben's approach to engaging the

reader. In the third chapter of *Eaarth*, entitled "Backing Off," McKibben turns the flow of thought from a fact-packed exposition of the circumstances, causes, and the economic and political implications and effects of climate change, to a description of an approach to adapting to life on the tough new planet. His focus in this passage is on our sense of community and how that may need to evolve to best survive life on Eearth:

Community may suffer from overuse more sorely than any word in the dictionary. Politicians left and right sprinkle it through their remarks the way a bad Chinese restaurant uses MSG, to mask the lack of wholesome ingredients. But we need to rescue it; we need to make sure that community

will become, on this tougher planet, one of the most prosaic terms in the lexicon, like *hoe* or *bicycle* or *computer*. Access to endless amounts of cheap energy made us rich, and wrecked our climate, and it *also made us the first people on earth who had no practical need of our neighbors*. In the halcyon days of the final economic booms, everyone on your cul de sac could have died overnight from some mysterious plague, and while you might have been sad, you wouldn't have been inconvenienced. Our economy, unlike any that came before it, is designed to work without the input of your neighbors. Borne on cheap oil, our food arrives as if by magic from a great distance (typically, two thousand miles). If you have a credit card and an Internet connection, you can order most of what you need and have it left anonymously at your door. We've evolved a neighborless lifestyle; on average an American eats half as many meals with family and friends as she did fifty years ago. On average, we have half as many close friends.

I've written extensively, in a book called *Deep Economy*, about the psychological implications of our hyperindividualism. In short, we're less happy than we used to be, and no wonder—we are, after all, highly evolved social animals. There aren't enough iPods on

earth to compensate for those missing friendships. But in this book I'm determined to be relentlessly practical—to talk about surviving, not thriving. And so it heartens me that around the world people are starting to purposefully rebuild communities as functioning economic entities, in the hope that they'll be able to buffer some of the effects of peak oil and climate change. (pp. 132–133)

McKibben's heartening observation of the early stages of community evolution (or "re-evolution"?) across the globe in ways that will provide support for life on Eearth somewhat involuntarily shifted my thought focus to the Northern Forest region and, more specifically, to the Adirondacks. What I might term "anti-community forces" certainly have had and continue to influence the region—here I am thinking of such technological innovations as satellite television/internet, automobiles, snowthrowers, asphalt, and concrete highways. These common innovations can reduce the individual and family reliance on community support in order to meet day-to-day needs and thus encourage the sort of "neighborless lifestyle" about which McKibben warns us. At the same time, however, it strikes me that a subset of these same innovations can be forces for *building* communities because of the inherent efficiencies they offer. As one example, the prospect of widely distributed access to the internet across the Adirondack region, as pointed out by others in discussions of sustainability (see Cox et al., 2008), has emerged as a source of potentially lifestyle-transforming access to information, enhanced communications, and support for green business development, all of which directly relates to the development and strengthening of Adirondack communities, much in the sense McKibben warns will be required.

Hand-in-hand with a renewed sense of the importance of community to survival on Eearth, McKibben points compellingly to an essential need to revalue or redefine such terms as "development," "resources," "wealth," and especially, "growth" to enhance and strengthen

communities in ways that will be required for life on Eearth. Restated in different words, I would interpret McKibben as saying the emphasis must shift to a distinct appreciation for the *quality* of life in our communities rather than quantity. That is, development need not be measured in terms like clear-cut forest acreage attained or mountain-view condominium units erected, but instead, might reflect the extent of sustainable forest management/silviculture implementation, conservation tillage practices, and the extent of reuse and recycling of construction materials achieved within a community. Resources need not involve utilization of virgin materials and access to old-growth forests stands for harvest, but might involve a description of the extent of reuse/recycle/repurpose/remanufacture in the community. Wealth need not mean such things as the dollar value of financial investments or of a fleet of cabin cruisers and sports cars, but might involve recognition of my capacity (and willingness) to engage in and support community service. Growth, as well, need not be expressed in terms such as the temporal evolution of Gross National Product (or a community-based equivalent), but might be expressed by the temporal evolution of the implementation of sustainable practices within the community. It is a choice we can make, and McKibben says clearly that we must choose correctly if we want to continue to inhabit Eearth, and we must choose now.

The "survival value" of communities to life on Eearth reappears as a major theme in *Eearth*; it is a theme that that contributes much enabling weight to the larger concept of "Backing Off," a key element in McKibben's path forward. Accordingly, as an extra underscore of the importance of communities to day-to-day existence on Eearth, I will quote one more passage from *Eearth* for I believe it illustrates succinctly McKibben's passionately held views on the importance of communities and to successfully "Backing Off."

The project we're now undertaking—maintenance, graceful decline, hunkering

down, holding on against the storm—requires a different scale. Instead of continents and vast nations, we need to think about states, about towns, about neighborhoods, about blocks. Big was dynamic; when the project was growth, we could stand the side effects. But now the side effects of that size—climate change, for instance—are sapping us. We need to scale back, to go to ground. We need to take what wealth we have left and figure out how we're going to use it, not to spin the wheel one more time but to slow the wheel down. We need to choose safety instead of risk, and we need to do it quickly, even at the sacrifice of growth. We need, as it were, to trade in the big house for something that suits our circumstances on this new Eearth. We need to feel our vulnerability. It's not just people in poor nations who are exposed to the elements now, but all of us. We've got to make our societies safer, and that means making them smaller. It means, since we live on a different planet, a different kind of civilization. (pp. 124–125)

The key phrase from this passage for me is, "We need . . . something that suits our circumstances on this new Eearth." In saying this, McKibben again speaks directly to the need for change at a fundamental level—a change in our values, a change in the substance, thoughts, and ideas to which we attribute value in our communities. It expresses a notion that parallels former House Speaker Tip O'Neill's observation, "all politics is local." So, too, all dimensions of community growth and development relevant to life on Eearth are local, and evolution of those dimensional characteristics, ultimately, must occur for survival on our tough new planet, Eearth.

In the end, the message Bill McKibben sets forth in *Eearth* seems about as uncomplicated as that of Al Gore in the June 2011 issue of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Climate change is not just happening; it has happened—we are in it now. It will continue on its current trajectory, and the effects *will continue to get worse*. Nevertheless, life on Eearth can survive because we can take steps that will enable survivability. But, we must take those steps *now!*